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RELIGIOUS IDENTITY AND MULTICULTURAL DIALOGUE IN
CONTEMPORARY EUROPE

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Abstract

This study wants to emphasize the relationship between religious identity, mainly Christian in Europe, and multicultural dialogue through the new challenges of contemporary society, such as migration, globalization and secularization. We are witnessing a transformation of the world compared to what it was before. This article aims to analyze the main foundations of the European religious identity, as the Europeans are found today within this paradigm mentioned above. We underlined here the role that inter-religious and inter-Christian dialogue plays in the European project in the long term. As a novelty we bring here the Romanian Orthodox vision, emphasizing the need of dialogue and meeting, starting from the premise that multiculturalism is not a failure, but the way multiculturalism was conceived, ideologically and especially socio-politically, led to the European blockages. The common European project is viable, but must be boosted and this should be taken into account from the religious perspective, not just from the economic, political and military one. In building the concept of European civilization, the cultural, religious identity has an important contribution. The article promotes a policy in matter of ideology and emphasizes the role of religion in Europe, especially the idea that the inter-religious and ecumenical dialogue is a European creation, and freedom, tolerance, respect of otherness and of the dignity of others are also concepts with a strong European and why not Christian mark.

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1. Introduction

Religious identity and multiculturalism are two notions very often encountered in our world, which refer to two realities of our world, to dominant features of our socio-political and cultural-religious contemporaneity, during this period of deepening globalization, because “globalization lies at the heart of modern culture; cultural practices lie at the heart of globalization” (Tomlinson, 2002). Our world is marked by numerous dialogues and meetings, by an impressive technological progress, and also, unfortunately, by conflicts, tensions, isolation or verbal and physical aggressiveness.

After the Two World Wars that traumatized mankind during the past century, we all hoped that our world would be better, more equitable and more beautiful. Unfortunately, as we know, even to this day it is not so. Although people should understand and tolerate one another more, however, we can notice a diminution of the capacity of tolerance, of understanding and collaboration, precisely where we should find something else. Religion, a respectable and sacred domain, is used by some people with no scruple to justify ideologies, create suffering or dominate, even though these things are contrary to the religious spirit itself.

The contemporary world is dominated by an increasingly greater failure of ideologies, by man’s quest to find the meaning of life, for we are moving on from the age of waiting for Godot and of the philosophical-political deformations on who-knows-what ideological bed to the contestation of the old order, to the construction of a more tolerant world, as little corrupt as possible, equitable and beautiful, for all. It seems a utopia, yet these ideals have always yielded new ideas and new socio-political and cultural paradigms.

Our world thirsts after sense, thirsts after virtue, longing for renewal and not at all willing to perpetuate what has failed to bring balance, peace and sense to past generations. In this world, terms such as cultural identity and multiculturalism seem logo-concepts of the old epoch, but they are also hopes of some vector ideas for the future, anchors of renewal and expressions of the need for social and cultural transformation.

The socio-political or ideological systems have tried, more often than not, to create multicultural paradigms, founding their approach either on militant atheism, or on religious indifferentism, often marked by the trap of false equidistance.

The approach and the impact of this study for the Orthodox theological scientific research, for geopolitics, sociology, history and the psychology of religion is very topical, because often there is confusion between multiculturalism and the ideologization of this concept. In the Romanian Orthodox theological environment, very open to topical approaches, this concept, correlated to that of religious identity, is approached more often than not in an exclusivist and closed manner, without looking at the two terms in a correlative relation and without finding communication bridges and a maximum of compliance to use the practical result of this approach in the daily life, as bases for the elimination of any form of discrimination, exclusion and conflict. Dialogue, cooperation and collaboration are three terms correlated to the concepts of multiculturalism and religious identity, along with those of ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue.

2. Problem Statement

Religion, hence religious identity, is a value in itself, because it refers to a man's path to God, from a personal perspective, while, from a social, communitarian perspective, it manifests itself as a system of values necessary to a good functioning of the social body. In the majority of the cultural areas, religion is an identity factor, thus it must be obligatorily taken into account in any social construction or strategic analysis (Remond, 2003).

It dominates man's life, because it offers man the perspective of eternity, the possibility of fearless development and manifestation in this life, and to defeat the fear of death is not just to win a victory from the human existential perspective; it is also the basis for a possible relation of partnership with any State and power, because it calls to dialogue and communion (Trachy, 1981). Thus, we shall approach the concept of multiculturalism and its de-ideologized variant by means of the Eastern Christianity – known for its integrating tolerance and generosity.

3. Research Questions

The Orthodox vision of the relation between multiculturalism and religious identity is not a contemporary construct, as it would seem, because in history we have several examples of good relations between these two vector ideas.

The easiest example is that of the Eastern Roman Empire, also called Byzantine *post factum*, where numerous populations, from different ethnic groups and even of different religions lived together peacefully for a long while. This was not an Orthodox Empire, as it would seem, yet they lived together well, without experiencing genocide or major conflicts. And this is worth remembering, they lived together in epoch dominated by violence and a certain use of the *argumentum ad baculum*.

Unfortunately, the political instrumentalization and ideologization created, close to the contemporary times, tensions and conflicts, artificially. We have an example in the relatively recent epoch, that of the former Yugoslavia, a multiethnic, multi-religious and multicultural country. Even if there were some incontestable tensions and divergences especially between the Serbs and the Croats, however, in this area, Christians, Catholics and Orthodox, Muslims and Jews, Serbs, Croats, Macedonians, Albanians, Slovenes and Bosnians were united in a single State construct, indeed, federal.

The interest of some great powers led to the disintegration of this country, using religious polarization and religious motivation, although the degree of religious indifferentism and atheism was quite high on the Yugoslavian territory, at the beginning of the 1990s. Some would say that in the former Yugoslavia there was a religious war or also a religious war, others would say that only great economic, strategic, military and political interests were at stake.

Probably, there was a bit of everything, yet no one can deny that the Yugoslavian peoples lived in peace and understanding for a long while, and the pretext for disagreement emerged on purpose, under an ethnic and religious mask. The religious identity is the unique and undeletable mark that a religious credo, lived and shared, puts on the life of a man.

Even an atheist has a specific spiritual identity, though marked by atheism, yet containing the cultural mark of a certain religious environment, because the soul cannot be neutral or totally indifferent from a religious perspective; in the case of atheism, this atheism becomes a religious surrogate, a religion

without being a religion, yet having a similar organization and means of promotion. Thus, for instance, the Orthodox spirituality gave birth to a culture and social mentality that turned the ancestral Church into a fundamental institution, *sine qua non*, of our national identity (Bădiliță, & Urian, 2003).

Religious identity is, therefore, the way of living founded on a religious credo, it is the exteriorization of the religious dogma or the social extension of the inner spiritual life, therefore it has great importance for the individual and communitarian life and activity of the human being. In fact, one cannot even exist outside the religious identity, even an atheist in a certain religious area subconsciously bears the mark of that religious area.

Religious identity also leaves a unique cultural mark, because each cultural area is born, deepened and promoted based on a specific religious paradigm. For this reason, we have a diverse cultural specificity on moving on from a religious area to the next. We shall have the Christian, the Jewish and the Muslim religious identity, if we refer only to these three great monotheist religious traditions, each with its own specific, without being ontologically one against the other, except if they were to be used so, politically or ideologically, by people alien to the authentic religious spirit. Religious identity reveals its optimal, creative side in the area of culture and civilization, by the numerous works of art, in literature, music and so on, as well as in the technical progress.

Concretely, the Romanians' religious identity has a strong religious component, without making the error of identifying and perfectly overlapping the two notions, as some extremist groups did, because the Jews, the Muslims and the Christians of other denominations than the Orthodox one have their own contribution to the building of this country.

Sure, we can talk about a more complex national identity without founding our ideas on the national concept, as it results from the thinking of the French encyclopaedists, dominated by atheism, maybe closer to that concept elaborated by Schelling and Herder, according to which the national identity relies on geo-linguism and not on a political and ideological construction. This concept of religious identity would seem limitative or founded exclusively on religion, on a certain religion, which would separate people, yet it is not so, because the true religious spirit is the one that unites, not the one that separates, is the one that brings people together, without making them enemies and without opposing them to one another.

Consequently, the other concept, multiculturalism, would seem somewhat limited by that of religious identity, yet that depends on what we understand by multiculturalism. Sure, there is that progressist understanding, of the socialist type, of the pre-eminence of the minorities in front of the majority, of safeguarding at all costs the minorities of any kind and of creating a strange equalitarianism between minority and majority that will end in the dictatorship of the minorities. Certainly, from the perspective of our Orthodox religious approach, we will not refer to this fact.

4. Purpose of the Study

The ideologized concept of multiculturalism exalting the minorities' rights and their domination over the majority, based on the unfortunate ideology of diversity, is today a failure, acknowledged by an increasing number of actors of the socio-political and cultural scene (Kymlicka, 2012).

The Orthodoxy speaks about multiculturalism, having a vision closer to what we nowadays call interculturalism. Namely, it has been noticed that the non-integration of the cultural, religious or ethnic minorities, out of the desire of not letting them disappear by integration, has proven a failure and an error, which has made them more aggressive and more isolated, thus becoming protesting minorities (Ică, 2001).

Recognizing and treating members of some groups as equals now seems to require public institutions to acknowledge rather than ignore cultural particularities, at least for those people whose self-understanding depends on the vitality of their culture. This requirement of political recognition of cultural particularity— extended to all individuals—is compatible with a form of universalism that counts the culture and cultural context valued by individuals as among their basic interests (Taylor et al., 1994).

Consequently, it is necessary to find a balance between the normal and natural need for integration and the need to keep the specificity, otherwise the result will be the Bantustanization, conflict and useless tensions. And here we have the already over-commented examples of Great Britain and France with the Muslim communities not-integrated at all, but isolated and marginalized, which still constitute a great problem.

It is not the forced conversion or the obligatory assimilation that will be the solution, but keeping a dignified and just balance between integration and specificity, because we need to agree that in the Bucharest of our days it would not work for instance - if we were to make an exercise of imagination - to speak Arabian only, to behave as in the Middle East and to be totally uninterested in the culture and civilization of Romania.

It is unacceptable, in any other city, as it is actually for a Romanian in Saudi Arabia, for instance, if this country were to become democratic and were to allow the manifestation of any other religion than the Islam - it would be normal for a Romanian emigrating there to faithfully appropriate the culture and civilization of that country, as a premise of his loyalty to his possible new country.

In contemporary Europe, people speak about the failure of multiculturalism, just as half a century ago people were speaking about the religious identity failure, thinking that prosperity and democracy will level out any human specificity, whether religious or ethnic. We see that it is not so at all.

5. Research Methods

As a result of this study, we propose to use multiculturalism as one of the key concepts of our world, also from a religious perspective, although the world of religion prefers the term of interculturality, which it sees as a reality of the cultural and religious diversity in collaboration, rather than simply as multiculturalism that concerns the simple protection and promotion of the diversities of any kind.

The present study refers to the problem of the relation between religious identity and multicultural dialogue, a topical issue approached from a Romanian Christian-Orthodox perspective. Thus, by means of the methods of scientific research, this topic is presented with the help of theological hermeneutics, critical analysis and comparison.

The novelty of this topic is given by the trans-disciplinary approach, by the use of methods and concepts common to moral theology, mission, ministry, geopolitics, or the psychology of religion, but also by a presentation aimed at an authentic Romanian Orthodox perspective. The key questions from

which this study starts are: What is multiculturalism from an Orthodox religious perspective? What is the relation between this concept and that of religious identity?

The argumentation has been used from a trans-disciplinary perspective, which wants to be as complete as possible, to transcend the limits imposed by a mono-disciplinary study. The objectives aimed at by the present study are: the correct positioning of the concept of multiculturalism in relation to that of religious identity from the perspective of the Romanian Orthodoxy, the description, the approach and the critical evaluation of this relation in the Romanian Orthodox religious area, the identification of certain deficiencies of approach and the deepening of the key elements of the two concepts, as well as the identification of the Orthodox and Romanian theological specificity concerning this concept.

6. Findings

Multiculturalism, as an opponent of all that has universal pretensions, of morals (Patapievic, 1996), as exacerbation of the rights of a minority, as dictatorship of the minorities, as pre-eminence of the individual over the community (Terheci, 2001) and as social-cultural censorship is a failure, but the need of understanding among people and communities, among cultures and religions is a necessity greater than ever.

Consequently, the classical type of multiculturalism is obsolete; now we need a new approach, as that offered by the possibility that we can glimpse in interculturalism, a process seen as co-integration, as inter-religious and inter-cultural exchange which, yes, can give sustainability to the common European project.

In fact, this is about a return to the guiding principles of Europe's forefathers, who would speak about a Europe of the nations and not about a super State, unified based on some philosophical-political ideologies sacrificing on the not-at-all-needed bed of Procrustes the truth and the dynamism of life, the reality of the human existence. Consequently, we have the duty to respect them and not to infringe them, being aware that, by infringing them, we violate God's image in man, and, ultimately, we dishonour God Himself, humiliating the creation or a part of His creation.

From this perspective, the best way for solving any dispute between a minority and the majority is dialogue, mutual respect, collaboration and cooperation. For this reason, the Orthodoxy is active and dynamic in the inter-Christian dialogue, concerning the remaking of the visible unity of Christ's Church, and concerning the interreligious dialogue, which has in view the common action of the great religions on topics that preoccupy mankind today, like ecology, social injustice, poverty, the fight for peace etc.

7. Conclusion

We shall mention that all minorities are important for any community and society, they have the right to existence and manifestation – yet the majority will not do them a favour by this, but will respect a natural right. The Orthodoxy has always believed that the human being is the corollary of the divine creation and has an inestimable value, hence the human rights and freedoms, along with man's responsibilities, are gifts offered since the creation by God to man (Ciobotea, 2005).

Europe needs a dialogue between cultures and civilizations, between religions and Christian confessions, between nations and ethnic groups, because it is not identity isolation or obstinacy that are the solution for progress and good understanding, but cooperation and collaboration (Charaudeau, 2010). Thus, the *religious dimension of the cultural dialogue is fundamental for Europe, because religion is the major matrix of its identity* (Ciobotea, 2005).

Indeed, unity in diversity can be achieved by preserving and going deeper into the different identities, yet seen as unique manners of development of the unity of the human nature, as a providential means of the dynamism of the existence and as an ontological divine given. Identity and cultural dialogue, non-dissolving integration and interculturality are dominant features of the Orthodox multicultural model, which has as fundament and vector image the image of the Holy Trinity - Three Persons and one Being.

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